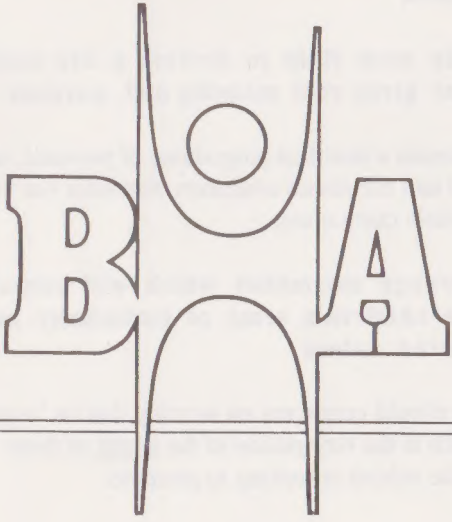
SHARED VALUES

Humanist views on religion in schools after the 1988 Education Act



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"To help make the children good" was the intention of and the justification for the religious education (RE) clauses in the 1944 Education Act.

The British Humanist Association strongly supports this aim, but not the method laid down in the Act!

In fact, we believe that using schools to impose religious belief is immoral, hypocritical and counterproductive. "Making the children good" requires honesty, consistent guidelines, kindness, sensitivity, and the experience of co-operation and responsibility. It is not brought about simply by a special 'injection' of RE.

EDUCATION FOR LIFE

Humanists have always believed that schools should:

*** establish a caring, thoughtful ethos**

this is achieved by day-to-day behaviour within the school: children learn best by example; they will come to recognise the worth of every individual and the value of basic principles such as truth, fair play and concern for others;

*** help each child to develop a life stance that gives real meaning and purpose**

this means a practical programme of personal, social, moral and life stance education, that must run through the whole curriculum;

*** arrange assemblies which will stimulate the children's sense of community and shared values**

these should centre not on worship, but on 'worth-ship' - which is the recognition of the worth of those values that the school is seeking to promote.

THE HUMANIST APPROACH

Humanists seek to teach children about the world's main life stances, bringing out the similarities and differences of moral viewpoint that arise. Theistic life stances (such as Christianity and Islam), as well as those which do not centre on an omnipotent deity (like Buddhism and Humanism), would all be included.

This kind of RE is in effect "Life Stance Education". Its central theme is the importance of each particular life stance for personal commitment and for living.

There should be no pressure on the pupil in one direction or another, either by the teacher or through what is laid down in the syllabus.

OBJECTIVE, FAIR AND BALANCED

"Objective, Fair and Balanced" was the title of a booklet published by the British Humanist Association in 1974, which proposed a new law to establish RE on an educationally sound basis.

The phrase sums up the movement away from the unashamedly Christian indoctrination of former times, which was the norm both in classroom teaching and in school worship.

The BHA's booklet put the case - now widely accepted - that our schools should adapt to present day society. This includes people of many different religious beliefs and those whose agnostic or atheist viewpoint leads them to a broadly Humanist life stance. It recognises that 'religious truth' cannot be imposed.

RE not RI

Until the 1960s the term 'RI' (Religious Instruction) was usual on school timetables. This was instruction in Christianity. Today, most syllabuses call for education about world beliefs (RE). State schools are no longer seen as vehicles for nurturing children in a pre-assigned faith.

This change came about after much discussion, and there is now a broad consensus among those professionally involved with religious and moral education. It is summed up in many reports from bodies that specialise in the field. These include the Schools Council, the Shap Conference on World Religions and Education, the Social Morality Council, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, and the Standing Conference on Inter-Faith Dialogue in Education. Humanists have participated vigorously and constructively in this more open approach, having served on the executive committees of the last three organisations.

THE EDUCATION REFORM ACT 1988

Over the last twenty years Humanists have been represented on a number of Standing Advisory Councils on RE (SACREs), and on many Agreed Syllabus Conferences. They have supported the widely held view that an educational treatment of this area of school studies and activity is concerned with ultimate questions of existence. It should help pupils understand how human beings have tried to answer such questions - and help them develop their own individual responses.

SACREs have been given increased powers under the 1988 Education Reform Act, and every Local Education Authority must now establish one.

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HUMANIST REPRESENTATION ON SACRES

Since the new Act, it is significant that all Humanists who were already on SACREs have been confirmed in their membership, and that there have been invitations to join from other LEAs. The BHA feels that it is vital for Humanists to press for membership, so that the non-theistic life stance is represented and our open approach voiced. RE is intended for all pupils, not just those who are religious, so Humanists have every right to be represented on the body which determines every school's policy in these matters.

ASSEMBLIES UNDER THE ACT - A BOMBSHELL

But the most contentious part of the new law is that concerning assemblies. The Act has laid down that there should be a daily act of collective worship which must be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character".

These clauses were introduced at a late stage by some highly conservative Christians in the House of Lords. They have been widely condemned as both reactionary and unworkable by those concerned with RE, and by Christians and non-Christians alike. They are causing confusion and anger in our schools.

The following words have been used to describe the new legislation:

"disastrous .. divisive .. (likely to cause) **chaos and mayhem"** (John Swallow, former President, National Association of Head Teachers; member of the General Synod of the Church of England);

"impossible and hypocritical" (Chris Lowe, Head Teacher; legal adviser, Secondary Heads Association).

The National Association of Headteachers and other bodies professionally concerned have deplored the legislation in similar terms.

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SCHOOLS IN REBELLION

The Act's compulsory "broadly Christian worship" runs counter to the whole educational trend of the past twenty years. This has been towards assemblies that are responsive to the needs of ALL the pupils in our schools. Such occasions celebrate the shared values of the school community, while respecting the variety of beliefs within it.

The Times Educational Supplement carried out a large-scale survey which showed that hundreds of school heads "are likely to disobey, or turn a blind eye, to the new law on the daily act of collective worship" (TES 30 June 1989). Some schools are so concerned that they are considering applying to their SACRE for a "Determination", allowing them to lift or modify the "mainly Christian" requirement. Heads could then preserve assemblies for the whole school, which celebrate shared values. However, others fear that any such move might lead to demands for many different acts of worship, which would fragment the school community. **It is scarcely surprising that teachers are dismayed and - in some schools - are invoking their legal right and refusing to take part in assemblies at all.**

THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL HUMANIST PRESENCE

Lord St John of Fawsley said in the House of Lords, during the debate on the Act: "No religion: no morality." This dismissal of all those millions of people who live decent, moral lives without benefit of God or gods is a warning of the intolerant arrogance of much of the religious establishment. The battle for freedom of thought and belief has not, as many people believe, been won.

We urge you to join the BHA to work for an end to this unjust and divisive law. Write to us at the address on the cover. Also, our pamphlet "TEACHERS AND THE NEW WORSHIP CLAUSES -- WHAT YOU CAN DO" *is available free of charge.*

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